

ELIZABETH TAYLOR 1932 -2011

Truman Capote described Elizabeth Taylor as “rather a runt....her legs are too short for the torso, the head too bulky for the figure in toto; but the face, with those lilac eyes, is a prisoner’s dream, a secretary’s self-fantasy; unreal, non-obtainable”. Such is the enigma of Taylor; despite being born in the 1990s, well after her heyday, I have been aware of her presence for all of my life and completely in awe of her magnetism. Elizabeth Taylor was mysterious; I always knew of her despite being unaware of any of her seventy acting credits. The display features examples of such works throughout her career; spanning from *The White Cliffs of Dover* and *National Velvet* in 1944 to her academy award winning performance in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966). Of course, one of the most famous performances of Elizabeth Taylor’s was in *Cleopatra* (1963) in which she first met her two-time husband, Richard Burton. The display features a lobby card from the film (EXEBD77064). Like all of the greats, she just *was*, and that was enough.

Of course, Taylor is known for much more than being MGM’s sweetheart; indeed, she was the sweetheart of many others, proven by her infamous eight marriages. However, her charm was not lessened by such marital frivolity; rather, the public were fascinated by her restlessness. Capote questions whether or not Taylor had the same attitude towards marriage as Marilyn Monroe, who claimed that; “Right or wrong, if I go for a guy, I feel I

ought to marry him". Such an outlook seems fitting for Taylor too; remarkable, unthinkable, and yet utterly understandable. Perhaps Taylor's outlook on life can be understood by her restiveness in marriage; "I guess when you find what you've always wanted, that's not where the beginning begins, that's where the end starts."

With Emma Sorrell and Ken Ross, I began the process of deciding which items to use for display. There is certainly no shortage of items in the archive of the Bill Douglas Centre attributed to Elizabeth Taylor and this often made our choices difficult. For example, there are dozens of gossip magazines from the '60s which feature Elizabeth Taylor as the main feature. Unfortunately we only managed to include two into the display (EXEBD47766, EXEBD47756), however, both depict Taylor's ever burgeoning fame. One of my favourite pieces is Elizabeth Taylor and Eddie Fisher's autographs (EXEBD 77796); whereas all of the other pieces are taken from the perspective of the 'outsider' this is a piece which feels somewhat more personal. In the display case, we tried to place the objects in a chronological order according to Taylor's personal and professional lives respectively. It is interesting to consider that after the 1980s there is a sudden decline in the items relevant to Taylor, yet she still remained (and remains) a globally recognised figure.

In the process searching for items to use in the display, the piece which fascinated me the most was a photograph of Taylor and her then husband, Richard Burton, arriving into Heathrow Airport (EXEBD 40542). It is not a particularly glamorous photograph of either (despite both being adorned in fur), in fact, both look relatively unimpressed with fame. I think this is why I like

it so much; that (despite their dress) they both look so normal. Figures such as Burton and Taylor- in the eyes of the public- appear and live in a heightened reality, of which the public could never fathom. We know everything about them without really knowing anything.

Multiple actresses have been dubbed as 'the modern Elizabeth Taylor'. The display features a double spread photograph of Elizabeth Taylor and Winona Ryder in the style of Taylor (EXEBD1056). I read a piece recently in a newspaper supplement which hailed Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt as the 'new' Taylor and Burton. However, the very fact that such stars are categorised according to the status of another actress does not allude to longevity in their careers. Stars nowadays have a shelf-life- of which they are well aware- and if they do not continue to appear in the public eye, they will most likely be forgotten. Taylor, the 'last great star' is not only an irreplaceable figure, but also one whose life can never be mimicked. In our society of the throwaway celebrity, we will very rarely come across a figure whose timeless stardom will be recognised as soon as we hear their name.